

Other Voices
Peter Van Zant

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February 2, 2017
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Peter Van Zant: There are alternatives to the Centennial Dam

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I attended the Alternatives to the Centennial Dam Workshop at the Wild and Scenic Film Festival.

Centennial is the dam on the Bear River proposed by Nevada Irrigation District (NID). The speakers were Jonas Minton, senior water policy advisor at the Planning and Conservation League; Dr. Sarah Yarnell, associate project scientist at the UC Davis Center for Watershed Sciences; and Jeffrey Odefey, director of Clean Water Supplies Program at American Rivers.

The Centennial Dam proposed by NID would be a 110,000-acre-foot reservoir with a 275-foot tall dam on the Bear River. It would inundate the last six miles of publicly accessible, free-flowing river on the Bear, covering the Bear River Campground, more than 25 homes and 120 parcels, 140 Native American sacred cultural sites, and Dog Bar Bridge. The stated purpose of the dam is to address changes in climate and the probable reduction in snowpack storage in the upper Yuba River watershed.

Three themes emerged regarding alternatives to the dam: 1. building a dam creates financial uncertainty and requires state intervention in NID's water use; 2. implementing industry standard water management strategies could achieve most or all of NID's water supply needs; 3. the Yuba and Bear river watersheds can be made more resilient to climate uncertainty with well-known restoration and management strategies. The Association of California Water Agencies (ACWA), of which NID is an active member, reinforces these concepts in its "ACWA Policy Principles on Water Conservation and Water Use Efficiency".

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Jonas Minton addressed the expense of new dams confirming the American River Watershed Institute projection of \$1.2 billion presented to the NID Board on Jan 11, 2017. Minton emphasized that droughts are an inevitable part of California's climate and increased cost of water is also inevitable. He added that the ultimate survival and health of the Bay-Delta ecosystem requires water from upland watersheds.

Ms. Yarnell reviewed climate change impacts including increased temperatures, snowfall starting later and ending earlier, more variation in snowmelt timing, larger floods, and longer dry seasons. She proposed improving watershed health by maintaining biodiversity, minimizing stressors, restoring meadows and forests, preserving natural flows in rivers, thus extending spring flows into summer. Yarnell concluded that, "meadows are a key source of groundwater supply to stream base flow."

Although any given meadow restoration would make only a small contribution, there are about 300 meadows within the Yuba and Bear River watersheds that, in sum, could substantially contribute to water supply reliability. She discussed how responsible forest thinning increases water storage, reduces loss from transpiration, and reduces the consequences of wildfires and limiting development in watersheds preserves meadows and prevents runoff from impervious surfaces that increase flood risk. Yarnell reviewed the recently passed AB 2480 that identifies healthy meadows and forests as watershed "infrastructure" eligible for state funding.

Mr. Odefey described dams as inflexible and expensive investments in the face of future climate uncertainty, whereas investments in water system efficiency and consumer conservation guarantee a return regardless of future climate conditions. Odefey addressed the relatively high consumption rates of NID users because of a lack of information and aggressive incentives to conserve. Where the California average gallons-per-customer-per-day (GPCD) is 133 gallons, NID customers use 246 GPCD! He projects that "at least a 33 percent permanent reduction is possible" by decreasing residential use, fixing system leaks, and increasing system efficiency. He discussed agricultural water use, NID's largest use category, which is not precisely measured or audited for true agricultural use resulting in valuable commercial agricultural water being used for large-scale residential landscaping. Appropriate use and pricing could improve supplies and support our valuable commercial agriculture.

Caleb Dardick, SYRCL executive director, closed the workshop by raising the challenge for citizens and NID to work together to investigate and design our water future. He suggested the community learn about best practices and alternatives available before committing to a costly, risky, and environmentally harmful dam.

I came away from the workshop with a timely reminder of the choices and strategies available to us that can provide multiple benefits throughout our watershed in addition to water supply reliability. The Centennial Dam project is financially risky given our uncertain climate future. The financial risk rests with us, the NID tax and rate payers, and potentially state and federal tax payers who help fund it. Can NID lead us toward a water-wise future that minimizes financial uncertainty creating a model for California? What is the purpose of the project if there is a better way forward?

Peter Van Zant, a former Nevada County Supervisor, Sierra conservationist and SYRCL volunteer, lives in Nevada City.